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ABSTRACT

Although children often receive classroom opportunities to retell and summarize information, they must also learn how to critically examine what they read. Critical reading of multiethnic literature helps children develop understanding, respect, and value for the diverse cultures and people in the world. This paper discusses the value of integrating critical reading and discussion activities with multiethnic literature. The paper uses simulations of three critical literacy activities which were selected because they are effective for teaching critical thinking in intermediate and middle grades. The paper's first activity involves teaching students to ask their own questions about the social assumptions authors used when composing their texts, while the second activity, "Inquiry Charts," provides a visual display of information that is gathered from several sources, and the third activity, "Dialogic Thinking," is a discussion strategy that helps students understand different points of view about a topic. Includes a bibliography of 81 selected works of multiethnic literature. (Contains sample activity charts for 4 activities.) (NKA)

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Discovering the Voices of Multiethnic Literature through Critical Reading and Discussion

Presentation for the New York State Reading Conference
Syracuse, New York
November 8-10, 2001

by

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Overview of Presentation

In this presentation we discuss the value of integrating critical reading and discussion activities with multiethnic literature. Although children often receive classroom opportunities to retell and summarize information, they must also learn how to critically examine what they read. This is especially true when children read literature representing the life experiences of people who differ from themselves in terms of ethnicity, culture, dialect or language. Critical reading of multiethnic literature helps children develop understanding, respect, and value for the diverse cultures and people in our world.

Children can use critical reading to question, analyze, problem solve, compare and contrast, and evaluate the literature they read with their own world views. Critical reading involves higher levels of thinking, and it can require the synthesis of multiple sources of information that are found everyday in books, magazines, websites, and videos.

Three critical literacy activities are simulated during our presentation. We selected these learning activities because we believe they are effective for teaching critical thinking in intermediate and middle grades. The first activity involves teaching students to ask their own questions about the social assumptions authors used when composing their texts (Simpson, 1996); after reading literature students are encouraged to generate "what if" questions that challenge the fabric of the text (e.g., characters, setting, problem, and resolution). The second activity, "Inquiry-charts" (Hoffman, 1992) provide a visual display of information that is gathered from several sources. Inquiry charts can be effectively used in all subject areas. The third activity, "Dialogic Thinking" (Commeryas, 1993) is a discussion strategy that helps students understand different points of view about a topic. To use "Dialogic Thinking" a teacher constructs a provocative question about a topic and asks students to brainstorm ideas that support different points of view about it; the activity closes when students articulate a position representing their own point of view.

We are sharing multiethnic books that we enjoy. Many of the books are contemporary classics and are widely used in classrooms. Others are newer and represent new stories and voices about ethnic and social diversity. We think all of our choices will be invaluable reading for intermediate and middle school students.

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Hamilton, V. (1995). Her stories: African American Folktales. New York: The Blue Sky Press.

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Literature Representing the Latino/a Experience

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Albert, R. (1994). Alejandro's Gift. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

Alicea, G., DeSena, C. (1995). The air down here: true tales from a South Bronx boyhood. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books.

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Inquiry-Chart

The I-chart procedure is organized around three phases: a planning phase, an Interacting phase, and an Integrating and Evaluating Phase. The **Planning** phase includes a broad array of activities that the teacher engages in prior to working directly with students. The second step is one of question formation. These questions, drive the inquiry process. The third step is one of I-chart construction with the major sections identified. The teacher records the topic, title, and the quiding questions on the chart. **Interacting** is the second phase. The teacher probes students for how they would response to each of the questions on the chart. These ideas may be accurate or inaccurate. All observations are recorded. The interesting information and new questions sections is where to record additional information and questions for future inquiry.

The final steps are clustered under the **Integrating and Evaluating** Phase. Students generate summary statements for each of the questions by incorporating information found in the research process.

Topic:	Question:	Question:	Question:	Question:	Question:
What I already know					
Summary					

Hoffman, J. (1992). Critical reading/thinking across the curriculum:Using I-charts to support student learning. *Language Arts*, 69. 121-127.

Dialogic Reading/Thinking Lesson

Who can authentically write about a culture?		
Position A: Only people who are members of the community can authentically write about a culture.	**Position B**: Outsiders who are well-informed can provide fresh and authentic accounts of a culture..	**Position C**: (your choice)
Supports for A	*Supports for B:*	*Supports for C:*
Group's conclusion:		

The goal of the D-TRL is to engage students in critical thinking about a story. Dialogic thinking helps students learn to argue for and against different points of view. The D-RTL requires discussion. Prior to reading the teacher constructs a central question. Students then identify reasons supporting a particular answer to the question. After listing their reasons, each is evaluated. Reasons are verified with text information, prior experience, and/or logic. At the end of each lesson students draw a conclusion about the central question.

Commeyras, M. (1993). Promoting critical thinking through dialogical-thinking reading lessons. The Reading Teacher, 46, 486-494.

Critical Questions

In this article Simpson shares her basic understandings about critical literacy. She often begins her lessons with teacher questions, and samples of these questions are presented below. Ultimately, students must be guided in learning how to ask their own critical questions [Simpson, A. (1996). Critical questions: Whose questions? *The Reading Teacher*, 50, 118-127].

Characters are not real but are constructed by authors.

1. How/why did the author ...? (i.e., Continually bring to the foreground the role of the author or illustrator in constructing the story or text. How could it have been written differently?)

Stories are not reflections of reality but are selective versions of it, told from a particular point of view.

2. Whose voices are not heard? Who is telling the story? Whose point of view is presented and whose isn't?

In telling a story an author will leave gaps in the text that the reader must fill.

3. What is missing in this version? What's been left out?

Readers will fill those gaps differently.

4. How does your reading of this compare with mine? Why is it different?

The author positions the reader to respond in particular ways through use of language, point of view, etc.

5. What does the author want you, the reader, to think and feel about particular characters and events? How does he or she achieve this?

It is possible to challenge and resist this preferred or dominant reading.

6. What is another way -- an alternative way -- of reading this text?

Authors write for particular audiences and assume that these audiences have specific cultural knowledge and values.

7. What has the author assumed is the "natural" way things are or "should be"?

Some values are privileged by the social and cultural context through which they are mediated.

8. What is he or she assuming is "best? What kinds of people, contexts, and experiences are either ignored or devalued?

In addition, Simpson offers ideas for critical text analysis. Some of her ideas are:

9. Setting questions: *How else could the author present this information?*

10. Disrupting questions: *What would happen if you changed the words or sections?*

11. Juxtapose texts: *Compare different accounts of the same event.*

12. Supply alternative endings: *Write different outcomes.*

13. Role play/role reversal: *Uncover what is unsaid.*

14. Insertions and additions: *Add new information or someone else's version.*

15. Deletions: *What would happen if information was withheld or deleted?*

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Shared Inquiry

The purpose of Shared Inquiry is to develop rich discussions about literature. Although discussion between teacher and students is good, discussion among students is more desirable. Consequently, the teacher's role should be that of guide and facilitator.

In Shared Inquiry teachers develop 4-6 interpretative questions about a reading. These are open-ended questions and ones which might be reasonably answered in at least two different ways. Interpretative questions require students to think deeply about a text. Here are some ideas for developing interpretative questions:

Ask questions about the plot.

What did the character really want?
What did she learn along the way?

Ask questions about story images and symbols.

What does it (image) mean in the story?
What does this image mean in your own life?

Ask questions about contrasting story elements

How are Jack and the Giant alike and different?
How is Junebug's mother alike or different from the aunt?

Ask questions that go "against the grain."

These are questions about social assumptions of ethnicity, gender, class, language, and so on:
Suppose the genders of the characters were reversed, How would the story be different?

Ask questions about ethics.

Was this character right to do what he did?
Would it be right to do this in real life?

Ask metaphysical questions.

These are questions about abstract concepts of hate, love, bravery, and so on.
What do we mean when se way that someone is brave?
Is it brave to face practical danger for on reason?

Ask questions to unmask the author.

With whom did you think the author wanted you to sympathize?
Did you feel it hard to go along with the author's ending?

(Borrowed from the Reading and writing for Critical Thinking Project - International Reading Association)